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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MICHALAK'S MEETING WITH CARDINAL MAN

REF: A)Hanoi 1748 B)HCMC 844 C) Hanoi 1461 and previous

Summary

1. (SBU) In Ambassador Michalak's December 3 courtesy call on HCMC's Cardinal Pham Min Man, Man described religious freedom in Vietnam as a kind of "controlled freedom," acknowledging that the situation for the Catholic Church has improved in general. The Cardinal outlined ongoing issues the Church is discussing with the GVN, including the return of confiscated properties and permission to expand their social work activities. Cardinal Man was skeptical of quick progress on furthering official GVN-Vatican relations, noting the GVN's decision to establish a Joint Working Group to explore the topic was most likely a means of keeping the issue alive, not accelerating the process. Having recently returned from a trip to China, the Cardinal was similarly pessimistic about China-Vatican relations moving forward. End Summary.

Talks with Top Leaders

2. (SBU) During the Ambassador's courtesy call with Cardinal Man, Man said the "cup" of freedom granted to the Church by the GVN was "getting bigger," but many issues remain unresolved. Over the past year, Man and other Vietnamese bishops have met with GVN leaders, including Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung and President Nguyen Minh Triet, to discuss the most pressing problems facing their dioceses. In the North, the bishops reported discrimination in "no Catholic zones" where local officials claimed that their localities "do not have and do not need Catholics." The Archbishop of Hue raised the issue of confiscated Church properties, specifically requesting that the GVN return 20 of 25 hectares in La Vang diocese. Cardinal Man also requested the return of the former Pontifical Institute in Dalat. While he noted no progress on the issues raised thus far, Man said the GVN had recently informed the Church it would not be returning 4,000 square meters of land confiscated after 1975 adjacent to the Great Seminary in HCMC.

License for Social Work Still Pending

3. (SBU) Cardinal Man said that, while senior HCMC officials have encouraged the Church to get more involved in caring for victims of HIV/AIDS, obtaining the necessary permits from city agencies to expand their social work activities has been a slow and frustrating process. The Cardinal said the situation recently became more complicated after local authorities in HCMC's Can Gio district who had previously granted permission to the Church to build an HIV/AIDS treatment center there were

sacked due to charges of corruption over land use. Two weeks ago, HCMC authorities informed the Church it now needs to obtain consent from the new district officials in Can Gio to build the center. Despite these issues, the Church now has about 20 groups of volunteers that are providing hospice care to HIV/AIDS patients around HCMC and are also directly assisting victims of natural disasters. Cardinal Man said while the GVN has not given them formal permission for these activities, they are also not stopping the Church from getting more involved.

Vietnam-Vatican Relations

¶4. (SBU) On Vatican-Vietnam relations, the Cardinal said there were two views in circulation in political and Church circles. One view is that "Vietnam cannot go ahead of China," which Cardinal Man said Pope John Paul II implied was the case when they met in Rome a few years earlier. The Cardinal also heard that the GVN "is only interested in making friends with those who have money right now" and that the GVN's current focus is on economic development and attracting foreign investment. Cardinal Man believes the GVN's recent decision to form a Commission to explore Vietnam-Vatican ties was their way of tabling the issue for future consideration.

The Cardinal on China

¶5. (SBU) Commenting on his recent trip to China, Man said Church leaders there feel the main stumbling block to furthering relations with the Vatican stem from the Chinese government's perception that the Vatican does not "respect China's culture" and is only interested in giving China "what they think China needs." Man offered his view that the environment for Catholics in Vietnam is much more open and permissive than in China.

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